DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 407 CS 207 847

AUTHOR Bell, Elizabeth S.
TITLE The Peer Tutor as Principal Benefactor in the Writing Center or It's Not Just for English Teaching Anymore.
PUB DATE Feb 83
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Southeastern Writing Center Conference (Columbia, SC, February 4-5, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Career Planning; *Education Work Relationship; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Job Skills; Peer Teaching; *Skill Development; *Tutorial Programs; *Work Experience; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

In addition to its other services, the writing center offers its staff professional skills that can be of advantage in careers ranging from teaching to business. First of all, graduate students who have tutored have an advantage when applying for assistantships, for they already have experience in conveying content and developing student skills. Those tutors who plan to enter the teaching profession also gain practical experience adjusting to a variety of learning styles and academic limitations. In addition, both graduate students and teachers benefit from being introduced, directly or indirectly, to current theories on teaching composition. For those entering the business world, the writing center provides skills and experiences in learning to achieve goals and to solve problems. Interviewing and learning to work with small groups are yet other skills learned by tutors in the writing center. Clearly tutorial training and experience develop communication and leadership skills that corporate employers as well as school administrators value. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED234407

THE PEER TUTOR AS PRINCIPAL BENEFACTOR IN THE WRITING CENTER
OR
IT'S NOT JUST FOR ENGLISH TEACHING ANYMORE

Elizabeth S. Bell

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth S. Bell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 207847

Elizabeth S. Bell
Assistant Professor
Writing Center Director
University of South Carolina at Aiken

The Peer Tutor As Principal Benefactor in the Writing Center
Or
It's Not Just For English Teaching Anymore

No writing center can perform successfully with a poorly trained or unprepared staff. In a very literal sense, the effectiveness of the writing center depends on the quality of its tutors. As a result we require many kinds of skills, competencies, and attitudes from our tutors, as Joyce Steward and Mary Croft point out in The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods (1982). They list six philosophical commitments that are fundamental for any lab teacher. Although they are quite accurate, their statements are deceptively simple. For example, one posits the undeniable basic premise that lab staff members should be committed to teaching writing as a process; others of the six statements are just as indispensable and primary, but the implications that follow from them are, nevertheless, quite momentous. Inherent in these commitments is the underlying assumption that the writing tutor can function as diagnostician, teacher, facilitator, evaluator, audience--handling such diverse concerns as analyzing student writing, discovering the most effective means of dealing with each student, confronting student writing anxiety, evaluating stages of the writing process, knowing when to intervene and when to let a student struggle, and deciding whether a face-to-face conference or a small group discussion would be more effective in a given situation. These are rather sophisticated

skills, yet writing centers across the nation are training staff members, many of whom are undergraduate peer tutors, to fulfill these roles.

To date, most research and scholarship on the peer tutor has centered on the vital issues of training and evaluating; Muriel Harris's Tutoring Writing (1982), for example, offers valuable suggestions for both, and its essays reinforce, time and again, the need for flexibility and competence in the lab staff. Yet there is another issue, more rarely examined, which has far-reaching implications, not only for the peer tutor, but also for the writing center's relationship to the university as a whole: In addition to all of its other services, the writing center offers its trained staff professional skills that can be advantageous in careers ranging from the traditionally-related one of teaching to the more unfamiliar ones of business and other professions. If we, as English faculty members and/or writing center administrators, fail to capitalize on these side effects of the writing center's performance, we not only commit a disservice to our tutors, but we also devalue the writing center's role as a learning center for the university's total program. While improving our client's writing skills and attitudes must remain our primary objective--for it is our reason for being--we can provide services that have unexpected applications in a variety of disciplines and can benefit our tutors regardless of their majors or chosen careers. We offer a unique framework for training competent professionals with very marketable skills,

capable of fulfilling the growing leadership needs of our increasingly complex society. It is time we made the university, the employment community, and potential staff members aware of this.

Traditionally, most peer tutors have been either English or English education majors, planning to move from college to graduate school or to teaching. Writing center staff experience can be helpful in both cases. First of all, tutors who intend to pursue graduate degrees have an advantage when applying for assistantships, for they already have firsthand practical experience in conveying content and developing skills in other students. In a recent interview, a former peer tutor from our program credited her tutoring experience with easing her adjustment to her current role as graduate teaching assistant. Some of her colleagues, without comparable experience or training, have expressed difficulty in conducting one-on-one conferencing with students. They have been, to an extent, overwhelmed by the new demands of evaluator, authority figure, and diagnostician placed on them. Our former tutor, however, could enter her new responsibilities with self-confidence about her relationship to freshman students, for she had had the chance to learn how to work with them in the non-punitive atmosphere of the tutorial.

Those tutors who plan to enter the teaching profession as soon as they receive their undergraduate degrees also gain practical experience in adjusting to the learning styles and limitations of a variety of students. Because in the tutorial they must deal on a face-to-face basis with their students' confusion and lack of comprehension, without the blunting effect

a classroom full of too many students can provide, the lessons they learn about teaching from tutoring are more vivid and immediate than classroom practice teaching alone can ever be. Peer tutors become adept at innovative approaches to editing or composing or spelling because they receive immediate feedback from their clients demonstrating just how effective their explanations have been. This is valuable training for any potential teacher.

In addition, both graduate students and teachers can gain in another way from their association with the writing center. If they have participated in a well-structured training program, they have been introduced, directly or indirectly, to current theories for teaching composition. They are, thus, ideologically prepared to value the process-approach to writing. Stephen North, who has long been an advocate of tutor training programs, encourages this process by giving his tutors lists of kinds of tutorials, such as invention/discovery, revising, or editing, which are based on both the student's "location" in the writing process and her "intention" for the piece of writing ("Training Tutors to Talk About Writing," CCC [December 1982]). Essentially, then, the writing center becomes a laboratory from the tutors' perspectives, for it provides them with the opportunity to put theory to practice, to see the actual uses of heuristics or of revision techniques or the real applications of audience awareness. School administrators, as potential employers, should be made aware of this experience, for it can dramatically influence classroom effectiveness in new teachers.

We, as faculty members and part of the university, usually acknowledge the tutor's exposure to instructional-based skills which lend themselves easily and logically to the graduate school or the teaching profession, but we sometimes fail to notice the potential extensions of these skills to the business or professional world. One of our writing center's former tutors is now a personnel director for a national carpet company. Her duties require her to work with a spectrum of situations from informal interviews with disgruntled employees to presentations before colleagues or supervisors to, occasionally, formal legal and contractual representations of company policy. She finds two elements of her tutorial experiences of value in her current position: 1.) In the writing center she developed "contact skills" which enabled her to work comfortably with people of different backgrounds and levels of competence. This allowed her to overcome any fear or inhibition when working with people, regardless of their degree of literacy, and to help them understand the communication process. 2.) She also developed the ability to be flexible or to "think on her feet," which she finds extremely useful for the variety of problems she must solve each day.

In effect, our former tutor has defined her experiences in the writing center in terms of learning how to achieve goals (helping students understand) and solve problems ("thinking on her feet"). In fact, her conception is not unique, for Steward and Croft describe the writing lab in very similar terms: "The lab is a center for individual and small group instruction where students come, either voluntarily or on referral, to

discuss and learn how best to meet requirements--those they set, those set for them--with any kind of writing they must do or wish to do" (p. 7). Their description of the writing lab distinguishes it as a "task group," rather than a "casual group," a classification John W. Keltner extends in Interpersonal Speech-Communication: Elements and Structures (1970): "The particular goal and objective of the task group usually involves some anticipated action. The casual group has no such specific task but may have a more generalized goal that does not reach specifically beyond the meeting itself" (p. 292). Clearly the goal of the tutorial extends beyond the meeting and involves the tutor in attempting a permanent change in the client's attitude or behavior toward writing.

Substituting the vocabulary of one discipline for another's in this statement provides us with a basic tenet of business management, as quoted in Robert Tannenbaum, et al, Leadership and Organization (1961): "Leadership always involves attempts on the part of a leader (influencer) to affect (influence) the behavior of a follower (influencee) or followers in a situation" (p. 24). Writing center experience, then, provides leadership training, for the tutorial situation is almost a paradigm of this definition. In fact, Thomas Scheidel and Laura Crowell (Discussing and Deciding, 1979), in breaking the leadership model into two interlocking parts, called"inner work and"outer work," describe in some detail a process that approximates the functioning of the tutor as diagnostician, facilitator, teacher:

"The leader observes and analyzes silently the ongoing work of the group on its task . . . . These inner assessments, which are constantly altered by new observations, are the basis for the leader's overt actions--what is said and what is done; from the inner work springs the outer work. . . . We cannot, however, think of inner and outer work as being done in turn, first one and then the other; both are done all the time the [encounter] lasts" (p. 90).

Frequently at some part of this process the tutor must develop yet another role--interviewer--in order to elicit from students information about writing problems, needs, or expectations. Steward and Croft perceive this as a primary step of the lab process and include samples of it in their description of lab methods. As central as it is to effective tutoring, interviewing is not a simple skill to perfect. Keltner, in his speech-communication text, lists fourteen separate functions the interviewer must be able to handle, from controlling the focus of the interview and creating an atmosphere condusive to communication, to listening carefully and adjusting frequently to feedback (pp. 276-80). Writing center experience allows the tutor to practice these skills regularly and to use them with growing ease and confidence. Indeed, the amount of experience the tutor has with these skills is usually not available to the undergraduate in any other college settings, including interviewing classes which can allow only a limited number of interview chances for each student.

Clearly tutorial training and experience develop communication and leadership skills that corporate employers as well as

school administrators value. All of us--as administrators, faculty, and writing center staff members-- should be aware of the competitive edge our tutors have earned with their work for us, and they should be shown how to market it for their career plans. We must encourage our tutors as well as ourselves to develop new and non-traditional perspectives in evaluating the advantages of tutoring, for it is valuable in today's job market.

Does this mean that we, as writing center administrators, should change our recruitment policies in order to offer important managerial training to students who otherwise would be uninterested in tutoring or whose writing skills are borderline? Obviously, no; with vigor, no. Our first responsibility is always to the writing center's client--the student who needs or wants help in mastering part or all of the writing process. Criteria for staff selection must focus on finding as tutors those students who are themselves successful writers and who have the personality, temperament, and desire to work with others. To accept anyone less qualified to be a tutor would be a dereliction of our responsibility.

However, we can increase the already substantial benefits writing center experience and training bring to qualified tutors; by learning to analyze in terms of their perspective careers or future plans the skills and expertise they develop by tutoring, we can significantly aid our tutors. In short, as writing center administrators we need to do what we teach our composition students to do: adapt to the specific audience the situation identifies for us. By using the appropriate vocabulary or technical jargon,

for example, we can enumerate our tutors' marketable skills in letters of recommendation to potential employers or in annual reports to the university administration in the terms most useful and suitable to the situation. Thus, a corporate employer who really wouldn't care about a prospective employee's knowledge of current composition theories might be very impressed with her interviewing experience, while the university superstructure, which might not be concerned with specifics, might be interested in the percentage of former tutors employed and the variety of careers they represent. The tutoring experience remains the same, but the way we describe it must be determined by audience and purpose.

From the beginning of peer tutoring, we have all recognized that it can produce immense personal satisfaction and growth for tutors, and we have drawn on the obvious applications of tutoring experience for prospective teachers. We need, however, to move beyond traditional applications into the previously unfamiliar territory of a high-tech world. Our tutors do develop skills in the writing center that transfer readily into the new environment and prepare them to step into a wide variety of careers of status and authority. It is time that we advertised that fact.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harris, Muriel, ed. Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1982.

Keltner, John W. Interpersonal Speech-Communication: Elements and Structures. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1970.

North, Stephen M. "Training Tutors to Talk About Writing." CCC, 33,4 (December 1982), 434-441.

Scheidel, Thomas and Laura Crowell. Discussing and Deciding: A Desk Book for Group Leaders and Members. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1979.

Steward, Joyce S. and Mary K. Croft. The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1982.

Tannenbaum, Robert, Irving Weschler, and Fred Massarik. Leadership and Organization. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.